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The Original Indie: The NJ Filmfest Turns 30

by Susan Van Dongen



Director Vic Losick interview Alan Dershowitz for 'In God We _Teach'

It's a white-hot topic, and one that is getting even more explosive as the 2012 presidential election stirs up. It's the role of Christianity in America, and particularly the issue of evolution versus creationism/intelligent design, and whether one or both should or should not be taught in public schools. Furthermore, is there even room for discussion of religion in non-religious public schools?

In today's polarized world, discourse on this subject can be strident and discussion difficult. However, one new, thought-provoking documentary, "In God We Teach," manages to be even-handed in its tone and consideration of issues of religious freedom, freedom of speech, and the teaching of evolution in America's high schools. Directed by New Jersey native and veteran filmmaker Vic Losick, "In God We Teach" will screen Saturday, September 10, as part of the Fall 2011 New Jersey Film Festival at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the film festival.

The RFC/NJMAC is New Jersey's only venue dedicated exclusively to the non-commercial exhibition of independent, classic, international, experimental, and progressive cinema,"

One of the things about "In God We Teach" that sets the film apart is the access director Losick had to the Kearney High School teacher at the center of the controversy, David Paszkiewicz, a popular history teacher, coach, and devout Christian, who had expressed his personal feelings about his faith in his classes. A student, Matthew LaClair (now a senior at the New School in New York), began to secretly record some of the remarks and took his tapes to the local school board for redress. When the board didn't take action, LaClair took his recordings to the media and the story exploded, not just in Kearney, but across America.

Defending himself in one of Kearney's local newspapers, Paszkiewicz says he was just exercising academic freedom and expressing his opinions in response to students' questions (questions he claims were asked primarily by LaClair). In addition, he cites several Founding Fathers' quotations as justification for his own statements. Otherwise he remained silent, that is, until his appearance in the movie.

"I focused on the story from Kearney," Losick says in a phone interview from his home in Manhattan. "I saw the story in the New York Times, and it took me a long time to convince David (to be interviewed). He was blasted in the Times and every place

it seemed, but I admired him, and I convinced him I would go down the middle. I feel successful with that. I wanted to do a story on the student, the teacher, and the town — it's character driven. David is arguing larger points not specific to Kearney, and that's what makes it uniquely American.

"I live on the Upper West Side, and my progressive friends were ticked off at me, saying 'you leaned over backwards for the Christian guy,' but I think it's a more interesting film when you hear everybody's arguments," Losick says. "I said to myself, 'if I'm going to approach this story, I want all of these arguments on the table. What do all of these people have to say?' I didn't want to preach to the choir."

LaClair became a media and First Amendment darling, giving many interviews and receiving multiple awards. "He's extremely articulate and intelligent, and he was unflappable in the interviews, great on 'Anderson Cooper,' and I remember thinking to myself, 'this guy is going to be something,'" Losick says. "But Matthew also had a history of being an instigator. For example, he didn't stand for the flag (salute), he wore political buttons to school, and at one point wore a skirt to school, as kind of an 'eighth grade Goth.'" "He describes himself as a loser, a guy who had been picked on and bullied," Losick continues. "So there's this issue that I happen to agree with Matthew, but he isn't the most liked guy. Whereas David is very likable, but I disagree with him."

A native of Tenafly and product of New Jersey public schools, Losick, with the help of some friends, made his first two films, "The Tower of Dracula" and "Al Capone," at Tenafly High School. His father, Paul, had majored in chemistry at Rutgers (Class of 1932) and joined the Chemical Corps in World War II. He then became an independent home builder in northern New Jersey. Losick's mother, Alice, was a stay-at-home mom. (Both are deceased.)

Losick graduated from Rutgers in 1965 with a bachelor's degree in Italian literature. His fluency in the language helped get him a sweet job right out of college, as a tour manager for Globus Tours of Lugano, Switzerland, taking American tourists around western Europe by motorcoach. In between tourist seasons I lived in Rome," he says. "It was a great time to be there. Italian cinema was at its most popular, with films by directors like Fellini and Antonioni. My friend, Enzo, spoke five languages and in fact, was in some 'spaghetti westerns,' so I went to the set with him. It was totally booming when I was there, and I managed to see as many films as possible."

Returning to the U.S. after a couple of years, he turned his interest in film from an avocation into a career. "It was the late '60s and cinema-verite documentaries were flourishing in New York, so after driving a taxi for a brief stint I was able to land work with Bill Jersey, and then the Maysles, and later with Bob Drew, among others," Losick writes on his website. "I learned to do everything on the job: assistant cameraman, assistant editor, soundman, editor, and cameraman. Along the way I was also making small films, producing, directing, shooting, and editing (including negative cutting) by myself."

He became a cameraman for the BBC in New York, then WNET 13, then CBS, shooting segments for "60 Minutes," working alongside journalists such as Mike Wallace. Losick has worked assiduously over the years on numerous documentaries and features, notably on "The September Issue," the 2009 documentary centering on Anna Wintour, Vogue's infamous editor. Just in the last few years, he has shot several long-form documentaries, including two for PBS' "American Masters" series — one on Ella Fitzgerald and one on Clint Eastwood. "The film on Ella is my favorite," he says. "Then, Scorsese did a series on the blues, and I worked on (the documentary) 'Piano Blues,' directed by Clint Eastwood. It was wild to have Clint whispering in my ear."

Married to Jan, a native of Scotland, Losick notes that his wife is a "civilian," not in the film business, but a very good critic. In the closing credits to "In God We Teach," Losick thanks a handful of his favorite teachers, going back to McKay Elementary School in Tenafly, right through Rutgers. "They all influenced me for different reasons," he says. "Being a school teacher was a noble job, and I still feel this way. Teachers have been demonized and bashed, so I wanted to thank them." Fall 2011 New Jersey Film Festival, Voorhees Hall #105, 71 Hamilton Street, New Brunswick. Saturday, September 10, 7 p.m. "In God We Teach," Appearance by Losick. \$10. 732-932-8482 or